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IDEAS

A chat with spydom's former chief

Ethical level of CIA falls short of public expectations, he says

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WE are sitting in a clandestine back booth of the Palm Restaurant, where Stansfield Turner, former director of central intelligence, is talking about the etiquette of bugging:

"I have a nervous habit when I wear cuff links. Sometimes I fiddle with the snap on the back of the cuff links," he begins. He remembers as head of the Central Intelligence Agency sitting in the Paris office of a French contact fiddling with the back of one of the blue cuff links he was wearing. "Suddenly I saw his eyes riveted on this cuff link. And I'm sure he felt this oval blue cuff link was a microphone and that I was turning it on and off."

In the world of spydom, mutual trust could be shattered by just such a breach of confidence. So Admiral Turner carefully dropped his hands, the Frenchman then dropped his guard, and the talk continued sans intrigue.

Turner doesn't tell that story in his new book, "Secrecy and Democracy: The CIA in Transition," but he does tell several others that offer an illuminating glimpse into the inner workings of the CIA at a crucial time in its history. The book is also a riveting but subjective account of his stewardship, which critics claimed weakened the agency.

Over a plate of chicken salad, Turner talks shop. He talks about a 36-hour war that started June 18, 1954, in Guatemala and that served as a controversial model for further forays by the CIA. The war was won by a broadcast ploy: A CIA radio station, camouflaged as a rebels' station, broadcast word that anticommunist Col. Carlos Armas had invaded Guatemala from Honduras with 5,000 men and was sweeping like General Grant toward the capital in a "people's rebellion." In reality, Armas had an "army" of 200 bedraggled men plus a few old aircraft and mercenaries. The mock-rebel radio station continued broadcasting frequent bulletins about the army's mythic march and a single bomb dropped on a parade field in the capital. Communist-leaning President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán resigned a day and a half later, while Colonel Armas was still outside the city.

Admiral Turner ticks off several covert operations like this, some successful, some unsuccessful. In his book he defends covert action against criticism that it is not moral, arguing, "These seem to me to be flawed attempts to

transform an idealized view of morality between individuals to a standard of morality between nations." He notes, too, that the CIA tried covert action in Indonesia and the Philippines, maybe other places, that didn't work. "And now they've tried Nicaragua," he says. "And it didn't work. As I try to say in the book, there are limited circumstances in which all the factors will

come into play, so that it's possible to finesse someone out of his government." Speaking of the CIA today he says, "They get off the track when they think it's a lot easier than it is, like Nicaragua."

Turner had commanded a destroyer, a minesweeper, and the whole US Second Fleet, but he balked when he was first asked to head up the CIA. A US Naval Academy graduate and Rhodes scholar, he was a military careerist who would have preferred to be chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

But when his President and former Annapolis classmate Jimmy Carter asked him to resign as commander of the southern flank of NATO to head the CIA, Turner saluted and did it. He took over at a dark time for the agency, after the 1975 Church Committee (appointed by Congress in the wake of Watergate revelations and press reports of CIA abuses) uncovered evidence that the agency had indeed spied on Americans. As a result, the public was deeply critical of the agency. Objectivity, legality, and restored reputation were the core of Turner's goals for the agency, he notes in his book.

Turner in his book stresses the importance of integrity and morality within the framework of the CIA. How does he assess current CIA director William J. Casey's handling of the agency in this area? "Well, I don't know whether it's Casey, whether it's Reagan, whether it's the White House, but I think that the mining of Nicaragua, the condoning of an assassination manual on Nicaragua, the shooting up of farmers' trucks going to market in Nicaragua, the [alleged] association with a unit — a Lebanese group that ended up truck-bombing 80 innocent people — are all actions that are below the ethical level that the American public wants to condone in the name of intelligence." (The CIA has denied any involvement in the bombing.)

At that point the waiter materializes, and Admiral Turner asks him to take away what's left of the chicken salad so he won't eat the rest of it. Self-control. He is a trim-looking man with a crest of silver hair, sea-blue eyes with a faint sailor's squint, and thick, iron-gray eyebrows that rival those of his mentor, Adm. Elmo Zumwalt.

There is no gold braid on his shoulder, but he looks like an officer and a gentleman in a tan summer suit,

BOOKS INTERVIEW